

**Comments:** The World History California Curriculum Framework

**Focus period:** Achaemenid Persia

**From:** Professor John W.I. Lee  
Department of History MC 9410  
552 University Road  
UC Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9410  
Email: [jwilee@history.ucsb.edu](mailto:jwilee@history.ucsb.edu)  
Phone: (805) 893-5681

**To:** Dr. Thomas Adams  
Executive Director, Instructional Quality Commission Curriculum Frameworks  
and Instructional Resources Division  
California Department of Education  
1430 N Street, Suite 3207  
Sacramento, CA 95814

I am very pleased to provide these comments on the World History California Curriculum Framework and specifically on the treatment of Achaemenid Persia (ca. 550-330 BCE) in the Framework. In general, the ancient history sections of this document are well written and reflect the best recent scholarship on the ancient world. The discussion of ancient Persia, however, is notably deficient. It is not based on the best recent scholarship and does not provide students an accurate picture of one of the major civilizations of the ancient world. I focus here on Achaemenid Persia because that is my area of scholarly expertise. I would add, though, that the Parthian (247 BCE-224 CE) and Sasanian (224-651 CE) periods also appear to have been unduly neglected in the draft framework.

Analysis of the draft *History/Social Science Framework Field Review* reveals serious deficiencies in the treatment of Achaemenid Persia. The Achaemenids are mentioned in the introductory overview (page 145, line 214) as a major empire of the ancient world, but the draft provides no other discussion of Achaemenid Persia: nothing about its foundation and expansion, nothing about its administration and economy, nothing about its multicultural and diverse population. Students being taught from this framework might justly ask questions such as why Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home and rebuild their Temple or how Achaemenid government functioned, but they will find no answers in the draft as it is currently written. Achaemenid Persia is the only major ancient civilization that the Framework treats so cursorily.

The absence of any clear and systematic treatment of Achaemenid Persia is particularly striking given that the History Social Science Content Standards, which form part of the draft *History/Social Science Framework Review*, specifically state that students should be able to “outline the founding, expansion, and political organization of the Persian Empire” (page 173, lines 860-861). This statement is buried in the standards list for ancient Greece, rather than being listed independently as it should be.

Some may claim that there is not enough room in the curriculum to treat every ancient civilization. It is hardly possible, however, to argue that Achaemenid Persia should be excluded for lack of space. Achaemenid Persia played a central role in the development of the ancient world. For two centuries it was the largest empire the world had ever seen, spanning from Egypt and parts of Greece in the west as far the Indus River in the east, from the Persian Gulf in the south to the steppes of central Asia in the north. The Achaemenids created an enduring legacy that influenced everything from ideals of rulership to the development of gardens and irrigation technology. Even the unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service-- “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds”-- has its origins in the ancient Greek historian Herodotus’ description of the Persian mounted messenger service, the *pirradaziš* as it is called in Achaemenid documents.

Thirty years ago, many scholars of the ancient world still saw the Achaemenids as little more than the “bad guys” in a story of triumphant Western civilization, but a wave of new research over the past generation has overturned this tired old stereotype. Recent research makes clear that Achaemenid Persia cannot simply be dismissed as a “decadent” or “Oriental” despotism. The empire’s political and military strengths, as well as its cultural life and economic complexity, have all received long-overdue attention. Scholars have brought in archaeological and art historical evidence, as well studying Achaemenid documents and inscriptions that provide a counterpoint to the accounts of ancient Greek authors. This research has emphatically not been a matter of simply replacing old negative portrayals of the Persians with new idealized images, but rather of carefully analyzing multiple sources in order to reach a balanced, evidence-based assessment of how the empire actually functioned.

Furthermore, recent scholarship reveals that Achaemenid-Greek interactions were not defined solely by conflict. Rather, there were extensive cultural and economic exchanges between Greeks and Persians. Thousands of Greek soldiers served in the Achaemenid military and Greeks formed part of the empire's administration. The increasing recognition of the importance of Achaemenid Persia in world history has also enhanced our knowledge of the enduring contributions of ancient Greece, Israel, and other ancient societies. Indeed, among the greatest benefits of the new research on Achaemenid Persia is that it enables us to appreciate the numerous cultural, social, and economic links that connected the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean and western Asia. These days, virtually all university-level world history texts, including those that my colleagues and I assign in our courses at UCSB, regularly include discussion of Achaemenid Persia. The 2013 Cyrus Cylinder traveling exhibition, which attracted more than 250,000 visitors in its tour across the U.S., is another indicator of our increased understanding of the historical significance of Achaemenid Persia. Unfortunately, the old stereotypes about Achaemenid Persia linger on in Hollywood movies and popular culture, making it even more imperative that all California students receive accurate, up-to-date information in their History-Social Science education.

In sum, the draft *History/Social Science Framework Field Review* represents a good start, but major revisions are needed if California's students are to receive an accurate, up-to-date understanding of the ancient world that relies on the best recent scholarship. One possibility is to integrate the discussion of ancient Israel, Persia, and Greece, since these three civilizations were in sustained and close contact with each other. In fact, a number of university-level world history textbooks take precisely this sort of unified approach. At the very least, the civilization of ancient Persia merits a section of its own, one that does not reduce the Achaemenids and other ancient Persian dynasties to shadowy extras in other civilizations' stories and that provides students a complete picture of the ancient world. I attach below additional comments on the study of Achaemenid Persia that I hope will prove helpful in revising California's World History curriculum. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I may be of any further assistance.

### **Proposed Comments for Section 6.4.5**

Under King Cyrus of Anshan (d. 530 BCE), the Persians expanded from a small kingdom in present-day southwest Iran to become an empire that stretched from Egypt to India and into Central Asia. Cyrus was a skilled military and political leader who paid attention to local traditions. Darius I (r. 522-486) consolidated the empire and created the Achaemenid dynasty, named after his ancestor Achaemenes. Darius' son Xerxes (r. 486-465) suffered defeats when he attempted to expand the empire west into Greece, but Achaemenid Persia remained powerful for more than a century afterward. In 330 BC, the Empire fell to the armies of Alexander the Great, but aspects of Achaemenid culture survived and were passed on to later Persian dynasties.

In this unit students will learn about the structure of the Achaemenid Empire, including the role of the Great King and of Persian satraps (provincial governors); its administration, including multilingual scribes, a road system, and a postal service; its tolerance of local customs; its complex economy including banking and the use of coinage; and its distinctive art and architecture. The Persian contribution to agriculture and horticulture-- from the planting of trees to the building of underground aqueducts called qanats to the creation of elaborate gardens (the Greeks called them *paradeisoi*, hence our word “paradise”)-- deserves particular attention.

Students will learn about the teachings of Zarathustra or Zoraster, a sage who preached a doctrine of ethical behavior and choice between good and evil. The rulers of the Achaemenid Persian Empire represented themselves as agents of Ahuramazda, the supreme god in Zoroastrianism, and saw themselves as protectors of truth and defenders of order against chaos.

Students will learn about the Persian role in the development of the trans-Asian trade routes that we today call the “Silk Road.” Under the Persians, many of these routes were for the first time controlled by a single empire, making it possible to travel great distances in safety. Goods (such as glass, musical instruments, metalwork, and textiles), people, and ideas made their way to and from the Persian Empire along this trade network, sometimes reaching as far as China.

Particular emphasis should be placed on analyzing both Persian and outside (Egyptian, Greek, Jewish) sources for the Empire. As so often in history, different people can have very different perspectives on the same event. Students should learn the importance of analyzing multiple historical sources and thinking critically about the historical evidence.

Students should also be encouraged to discuss the complex nature of Achaemenid imperialism. Many appreciated the stability, prosperity, and tolerance that the empire provided. At the same time, the Persians expanded through military force and exploited the resources of those whom they ruled. The Persians conquered the Greek city-states of western Anatolia and unsuccessfully invaded Greece itself several times. Students may compare different perspectives on these events through reading selections from Greek authors such as Herodotus (ca. 484-425 BCE) alongside Achaemenid documents and royal inscriptions.

### **Current Language (2009)**

Teachers may help students understand Greek history by situating it in the broader context of western Asia. In the mid-sixth century BCE, the Persians, a people whose state was centered in present-day Iran, conquered Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia. The rulers of the Persian Achaemenid Empire represented themselves as agents of Ahuramazda, the supreme god in the regionally important religion of Zoroastrianism. Students may compare the types of government represented by the polis and by large empires such as the Achaemenid. The Persians subjugated the Greek city-states of western Anatolia, but they failed in three attempts to invade the Greek peninsula and defeat the Greeks, including those in the cities of Athens and Sparta, the most powerful city-states. Teachers may ask students to read selections from Herodotus (ca 484-425 BCE), the Greek scholar who wrote a vivid narrative of these events in *The Persian Wars*. [Note: the actual title of Herodotus' work is *The Histories*.]